Interdisciplinary Reflection on Ethical Literary Criticism and Literary Theory Framework*

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Abstract

Ethical literary criticism is a new theory generated from the trend of ethical criticism. It was founded on the basis of the theory of the three stages of human civilization, namely, natural selection, ethical selection, and scientific selection. Focusing on the analysis of ethical choices in literary texts with terms such as ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical will and so on, ethical literary criticism interprets all kinds of literary writings, dissects examples of ethical choices in different environments and contexts, and emphasizes the ethical value of literature in search of moral enlightenment and instruction for the readers. Through the deployment of its own terms, ethical literary criticism can be used to obtain new interpretations and understanding of literary texts, and effectively solve the problems raised by the literary text.

Any theory must have its own theoretical framework. If there is no theoretical framework, arguments cannot constitute a theory. As a theory, ethical literary criticism was founded on the central category of ethical choice. As the framework of ethical literary criticism, it is the basic structure and model of the system. It is not only the underlying logic of literary theory but also its basic principle.

I. Theoretical Misreading of the Trend of Thought

As early as 1968, Roland Barthes, a contemporary French literary theorist and critic, ventured into the idea of the "death of author."[1] More than 30 years later, Hillis Miller discussed the "death of literature" in his work *On Literature* (2002)[2]. He said, "The end of literature is at hand. Literature's time is almost up. It is about time."[3] The death of literature echoes the death of the author, and highlights the question of whether literary theory is suitable for explaining literature. It is the failure of literary theory to explain the changes in literature that leads to the question of the value of literary theory.

In fact, the death of literature means the death of literary theory. In 1987, Professor Stein Haugom Olsen at The University of Oslo published *The End of Literary Theory*, an early work on the death of literary theory. Since then, many works on topics of "the end of theory", "the death of theory", "the death of literature", "the end of literature" and other issues have been published, namely, *The Significance of Theory* (Terry Eagleton,1990, *The Direction of Literary Theory (*Steven Earnshaw, 1996), *After the death of literature* (Richard B. Schwartz, 1997), *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Martin McQuillan, 1999), *The Future of Theory* (Jean-Michel Rabate, 2002〕, *After theory* (Terry Eagleton, 2003), *The Death of the Critic* (Rónán McDonald, 2007), *Death-drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Robert Rowland Smith, 2010), *Death Representations in Literature: Forms and Theories* (Adriana Teodorescu, 2015) and *The Birth and Death of literary theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Galin Tihanov, 2019). They are all the representative works that relate to the fate and "death" of literary theory.

Since the discussion focuses on the death of literary theory, what is theory or literary theory? A theory is a systematic rational knowledge and a knowledge system in a particular field. In *Ci Hai*, a well-known Chinese dictionary, theory is defined as "a system of concepts and principles, and a systematic rational understanding with characteristics of comprehensiveness, logic and systematization."[4] The entry of theory in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* explains theory as "The systematic conclusions about the knowledge of nature and society that people generalized from practice."[5] In *Webster's New International Dictionary*, theory means "the coherent set

of hypothetical, conceptual, and pragmatic principles forming the general frame of reference for a field of inquiry."[6] The explanation of theory in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* is that it is "A supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained."[7] In *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language,* theory is "a system of rules or principles."[8] From the definitions cited above, a theory is a principle derived from practice that comprises systematic viewpoints, concepts, and terms. So, theory is an ideological system that explains various things.

Literary theory refers to the system of literary principles, rules and terms and concepts of literature associated with critical practice. Specifically, it is a summary of the laws of literary writing, appreciation, and criticism, which are mainly used for the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary texts and issues. In *Theory's Empire* Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller stress that "the theory itself will consist of a set of claims or principles in respect of some object or phenomenon; and the objects or phenomena may be widely varying in nature."[9] In *Literary Theory*, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren also define literary theory as "the study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like."[10] In short, the different viewpoints on what theory or literary theory is, share some common points as follows: First, theory should be a systematic system; Second, theory is an abstraction of the phenomenon with accepted conclusions in accordance with logic; Third, it is a tool of thinking. Hence, the methodology used to analyze, understand, explain, understand, and evaluate the literature also falls under literary theory.

The many definitions of literary theory notwithstanding, their basic feature is that first and foremost a system, a framework which is not an unsystematic or unstructured issues or ideas. If we examine the so-called literary theories from this perspective, we may have to reflect on them more deeply this time and question whether they are literary theories or not.

Why should we raise the question of what literary theories are? We have to wonder what theories are after all because we theoretical trends, ideas, concepts, and categories which are conventionally associated with

what are called literary theories can be quite confusing. In the case of China, for example, as a result of the country's reform and opening-up, various Western theories have been translated and introduced as literary theories. With the help of academic journals and conferences, particularly scholarly exchanges between China and Western countries, Western theories have quickly entered Chinese academic circles, which have become popular. However, if we take a closer look at the leading theories which we are so familiar with, we may have to rethink and redefine them. For example, if we try to define feminist, ecological or cultural criticism, and other Western theories that we teach in universities, discuss at different academic conferences, and use in our papers, we might have to clarify important definitions.

What are these so-called theories? How should they be understood and defined? If we reflect on those theories -- including feminism, culturalism, post-modernism, post-colonialism and so on -- that we have been following for decades, upon closer scrutiny, we might find that they are not by definition systematic theories. Instead, although the insights that have been developed around them are valid and significant in themselves, they consist of critical viewpoints borne out of thoughts and ideas on literature and literary criticism, history, politics, society, and culture. Indeed, many of these theories which we accepted as trends have exerted a great influence on literature, philosophy, culture, and society, even dominating our thoughts. Obviously, it is easy to confuse trends with theories. Nevertheless, by and large, it is the systematic nature of the discourse that distinguishes theories from trends. As suggested earlier, without a theoretical or discourse system, they cannot be regarded as systematic theories. For example, feminism, which came into being for advocating political equality between men and women and fighting for women's right to vote, is a trend of thought in society but by definition not a theoretical system in literary theory. In fact, it was widely accepted more as a political trend than as a theory as such. In the field of literary criticism, although feminism argues for political values and issues in literature, it is difficult to define it as literary theory per se. Similarly, ecological criticism came from environmental pollution and the ecological crisis caused by modern industry. Although it has been widely accepted in literature, it

is not a literary theory per se but a social, political, or cultural trend. There are other similar trends accepted in literature that are literary viewpoints or ideas but not theories for want of a theoretical system.

A trend is a prevailing tendency or inclination which is the product of the times, the common identity of society and the generally accepted social thought. It is also a kind of ideological tendency that reflects the common interests, understanding, needs , and aspirations of certain groups at a certain period. Its characteristics are as follows: (1) it is the ethical expression of a group rather than that of an individual; (2) it is socially accepted rather than a personal standpoint; (3) it puts forward unsystematic ideas and views or theoretical thought but not theories; (4) it is a kind of non-instrumental idea that needs to be explained but is not used for explanation; and (5) it is not a principle that can appear or disappear in historical environment at certain times. Overall, the trend could breed theories, but it is not theory itself. It can put forward questions but not solve them. Therefore, theory and trend are two different concepts that need to be distinguished from each other by definition.

If we make a distinction between theory and trend, it might be much easier to see why the questions such as "the end of the theory," "the death of the theory," and others coming from "theory terminators" have been raised and discussed by scholars. The above questions may have been caused by misreading and misunderstanding because, for example, although scholars who hold the argument of the death of theory, still use the term "theory" to discuss the theoretical questions, what they are referring to is not the end of the theory but the trend of thought. Many trends such as humanism, classicism, enlightenment, realism, romanticism, symbolism, and others have disappeared or died before and in the 20th century. Whether they were social, cultural, or literary thoughts, they came to an end and died. Even if some thoughts, such as humanism and classicism, have been revived in the name of neo-humanism and neoclassicism, they now constitute new trends in the new era and environment.

Trend of thought always belongs to a specific period, environment, or social community. It could only enjoy a certain life cycle in history and exist

in the environment for a certain context. If the time and environment were to change, the trend will end and die. However, the end or death of one trend often means the rebirth of another, such as romanticism being replaced by realism in the 19th century and revived in some forms of modernism in the 20th century. Compared with the trend of thought, the life cycle of theory is much longer. For instance, the theories of epistemology, relativity, labor value, clash of civilization, and other theories are still alive while others have died. Because there is a close connection between theories and trends – especially since theories often come from trends and trends were produced on basis of theoretical ideas -- it is often challenging to distinguish between them clearly. Therefore, when we discuss the end or death of the trend, we should distinguish it from the theory to avoid falling into the trap of misreading trend for theory.

It is important to pay attention to the following broad theoretical issues: the construction of new theories born of trends and to those theories used to explain the death and rebirth of the trends, the replacement and development of society, the changes of ideas in the past, present, and future, and the indispensable literature and art in our lives. As suggested earlier, we cannot formulate a theory without a framework that is not only its cornerstone and basic law, but also its principle and logic. Without the framework, the theory cannot come into being.

II. The Theoretical Framework is the Cornerstone of Theory Construction

According to Steven Knapp and Walter Michaels in their 1982 essay,

> The issues of belief and intention are, we think, central to the theoretical enterprise; our discussion of them is thus directed not only against specific theoretical arguments but against theory in general. Our examples are meant to represent the central mechanism of all theoretical arguments, and our treatment of them is meant to indicate that all such arguments will fail and fail in the same way. If we are right, then the whole enterprise of critical theory is misguided and should be abandoned.[11]

Since then, in particular, from early 21 century, the "death of theory" has been a largely attractive topic in literary studies. In fact, the death of literary theory is linked to several other questions such as the death of literature and death of the critic. In his book *On Literature*, Hillis Miller says, "It cannot be denied that literary theory contributes to that death of literature."[12] He stresses again, "The efflorescence of literary theory signals the death of literature. "[13] To ask what use literary theory is without literature, is to also ask a similar question about the critic's role. In *The Death of the Critic*, Ronan McDonald deplores the decline of literary criticism and seeks to explain the value of critics. The death of the critic means the death of literary theory because without the critic, there is no theory. However, some scholars, such as Galin Tihanov, asserts in his work *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (2019), that the death of literary theory means the rebirth of literary theory, implying some confidence in the importance of literary theory. Galin Tihanov is right because theories will not disappear; while we see some theories disappearing, we also see new theories emerging.

Whether it is the death of literary theory or the death of literature, to a large extent, it is just a different expression for the death of literary trend, which is the result of misreading or misinterpreting trend as theory. Generally, trend looks like theory because it is not only composed of thought but also gives birth to theory. It is due to their similarity that the trend is mistaken for the theory. The trend is the soil that breeds theory but it is not theory itself as it doesn't become theory. There may have been a sprout of theory growing out of a trend but it may have died before it was born when the trend became obsolete. This shows that the trend is very important for generating theory, but there is a more important premise for generation of theory: the theoretical framework. Trend is a social basis for the development of theory, but it is not the cornerstone to build theory. Constructing theory, similar to building a house, requires a solid foundation, namely, the theoretical framework which is indispensable to theory construction.

What is referred to as the framework of literary theory is the basic structure of literary theory which can be also called its model of the system. It is not only the underlying logic of literary theory but also its basic principle. It

is also a research path to finding new literary interpretations and giving birth to new literary arguments. Any theory must have its own theoretical framework. If there is no theoretical framework, arguments cannot constitute theory.

Why is it necessary to stress the framework of literary theory? Without a good framework as the basis and premise, theoretical viewpoints cannot be bred, literary theory and discourse cannot be generated, and the questions on the death or end of the theory cannot be answered. Whether theory or trend is dead or not, the current theory cannot solve literary problems in today's reality. Hence, it is necessary to construct a new theory, but first, we need to find the framework for the construction of theory.

What is the best way to construct a new framework? Adherence to a scientific outlook is a basic requirement. Challenges include the perceived split between humanities and science and the serious lack of scientific spirit which hinder the development of humanistic studies; hence, there is a need to discuss the value of science to literary theory. As early as in 1959, in his lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge entitled "Two Cultures," C. P. Snow asserted that literary intellectuals and science are two opposing poles. He said, "Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension— sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. "[14] As the two poles cannot be reconciled, literary intellectuals cannot break away from old ideas to develop a new framework for the construction of literary theory. For a long time, the study of literature, especially literary theory, has been regarded as subjective to the extent that it is deemed to belong to the field of "ideology," which is irrelevant to science and technology. However, the rapid development of science and technology such as brain science, neurocognitive discoveries, invention of biochips, in the application of artificial intelligence technology in humanities, has changed the nature of literary studies. Hence, traditional subjective study characterized by ideology has gradually changed into scientific thinking directed by scientific principles and technical analysis. It is

becoming a trend. Historically, the scientific turn of linguistic research is the precursor of this change and can be regarded as the forerunner of the scientific turn of literary studies. Following the example of linguistic research, scientific factors must be considered when constructing a new framework of literary theory and criticism. In contrast to the traditional ethical, aesthetic, and cultural framework, the new framework is to be constructed in consideration of advanced scientific thought. In fact, over the years, science and technology are more and more used to solve literary problems in the real world and promote the rapid shift of interest within literary studies from the humanities to science in an interdisciplinary way. In the age of science, the new framework of literary theory cannot be constructed without science and technology. Furthermore, it must be produced as a result of interdisciplinary research of brain science, neurocognition, and artificial intelligence with literature. The current replacement of human translation by machine translation and poems written by Microsoft's AI indicates that literary studies has become more and more integrated with science and technology now than before.

To formulate the basic theoretical framework of literature, it is necessary to break through the structures of ethical, aesthetic, and cultural frameworks, rethink past theories and methods from an interdisciplinary standpoint, and reflect on past ideas, viewpoints, and conclusions in a critical way. It is on the basis of new understandings, ideas, and conclusions that we can construct a new interdisciplinary framework of literary theory as the foundation of ethical choice in literature. Thus, an innovation in literary theory, in the form of a literary framework, can be realized in the interdisciplinary studies of literature.

In China, the five Confucian virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith" are the moral codes. These are the long-cherished core ethics of Confucianism in Chinese history, as well as the theoretical framework of politics, literature, and arts in the Chinese feudal society. In the long history of China, these five virtues are both the ethical basis of the political system of feudal society and the ethical standards of literary writing and criticism. On this basis, Confucianism, which has long occupied a domi-

nant position in Chinese academic circles, lasted for more than 2,000 years from the Western Han Dynasty to the May 4th Movement in the early 20th Century. After the founding of New China or the People's Republic of China, although some thoughts relating to Confucian ethics continued to play a role, new socialist thought took its place in the mainstream. In the Western literary world, the ethical tradition has existed for a long time. Since the 19th Century, many modern ideas have gradually become mainstream. In the second half of the 20th Century, an obvious tendency toward ethical return appeared in the literature, as well as an ethical turn in the literary world in the 1980s.

In the field of literature, aesthetics has undoubtedly been the most influential literary thought in the 20th Century. Since the 1980s, the concept of aesthetics as an ideology has not only become the leading thought in Chinese literary theories but has also been regarded as an essential attribute of literature. As an increasing number of people joined in the discussions, talks and writing on aesthetics of literature have become a trend, making it popular to talk and write about aesthetics. In literary studies, aesthetics is the most-used term, which is the focus of discussion when scholars talk about literature and write papers. Although some scholars have questioned the theory of aesthetic ideology which Chinese scholars have coined to explain literature, their doubt is drowned out in the tide of aesthetic discourse. The theory of aesthetic ideology is not only regarded as the most important innovative achievement of literary theory in China since the new period but has also developed into a basic framework of literary theory. As a matter of fact, the main literary theoretical systems are constructed around aesthetic ideology, and the same is true for many literary viewpoints. In the view of these literary theorists, like political correctness, aesthetic ideology in literary theory and criticism cannot be questioned, let alone given up.

In the second half of the 20th Century, Western literary critics began to analyze literary works from a cultural perspective. In the 1990s, Huntington published his paper, "The Clash of Civilizations" and the work entitled, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World*. Huntington has emphasized the importance of "culture" much more than any other time in history, and

argued that culture will be sowing division and causing conflicts, genera-
ting strong repercussions in the western cultural and literary theoretical
circles. In this regard, cultural criticism has focused not only on analyzing
texts and symbols but also connects the objects of analysis with social events
and cultural phenomena. It analyzes the internal structure of the text and
investigates the text environment, the system of production and reproduc-
tion, as well as its dissemination and acceptance. This focus has provided
a new space for literary research. The fact that there is no accepted defi-
nition of cultural criticism does not prevent it from becoming one of the
most influential trends of thought. In the 1990s, Western cultural criticism
entered China and quickly developed into one of the most influential trends
in Chinese literature. It not only gave birth to the upsurge of cultural studies
there but also had an important impact on Chinese traditional literary
concepts and research methods.

But ethical, aesthetic, and cultural criticism are accepted under vague
definitions but it has not diminished the scholars' enthusiasm for theo-
ries, nor has it affected their ability to become the framework of literary
theory. Ethical, aesthetic, and cultural criticisms have been the three most
influential literary trends in China since the 1990s. They are not only the
three major frameworks of Chinese literary theory, but also basis for the
generation of literary thoughts, view-points and topics. So, they have enjoyed
an important long-term position in Chinese literature's theoretical circle.
However, their inherent defects of theoretical logic make it difficult to form
a theoretical system based on them. Aesthetic criticism, for example, has had
the greatest influence among the three theoretical trends and produced many
viewpoints; yet, it is difficult to construct its literary theoretical system.

III. Ethical Literary Criticism after the Theory

The question of whether literary theory is dead has been a topic of long-term
discussion in academic circles. Factually, what literary theorists care about is
not the death of the theory, but the lack of a useful theory. Although there
are many theories pervading the world, they exist as trends rather than as
theories. As literary theories, they cannot answer basic questions such as the

literature's definition, its origin, function, values and so on. They tend to raise urgent questions which demand serious answers. What should we do? We need to construct a useful and effective new theory.

Literary theory needs to be constantly updated and perfected so that it can be useful for responding to questions in history and reality, both at present and in the future. Only by constructing new theories can we found the basis to discover new methods and explain the questions that have remained unsolved for a long time. Ethical literary criticism is such a new theory generated from the trend of ethical criticism. Unlike other current trends, it was founded on the basis of the theory of the three stages of human civilization and takes ethical selection with ethical choice as its core theory to construct its theoretical system and discourse to differentiate itself from the trend of the ethical criticism that appeared in the United States in the 1980s. In general, ethical criticism in U.S. is only a trend without its own theoretical system and concepts. However, by focusing on the ethical choices in literary texts -- and using its own theoretical terms such as ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical will and so on -- ethical literary criticism interprets all kinds of life phenomena in literary writings, analyzes ethical problems arising from complex relationships, such as man and self, man and others, man and society, and man and nature, dissects examples of ethical choices of different people in different environments and contexts, and analyzes the occurrence, development, and results of ethical choices. It adopts the viewpoint of the educational function of literature and emphasizes the ethical value of life experience in the search for moral enlightenment and instruction in literature. Through its own terms, ethical literary criticism can be used to effectively solve the problems raised in literature and obtain new interpretations, understandings, and conclusions.

Take Hamlet as an example. He asked himself: "To be or not to be, that is a question!" Traditionally, most scholars understand Hamlet's self-ques-tioning as his reflections about life and death. However, if we analyze his self-questioning in terms of ethical choices, we will realize that Hamlet is not thinking about life and death, but about how to make his choices; that is, whether it is right or not for him to avenge his father. In fact, Hamlet is

faced with an ethical dilemma. Revenge for his father is his ethical responsibility and moral obligation, so his revenge is legitimate. But if he takes revenge, he will violate the ethical taboo of patricide for killing Claudius, his stepfather. This is a serious ethical crime. So, what Hamlet is faced with is the question of whether it is moral or not for him to avenge his father. That is to assume that it is immoral for him to kill his stepfather for revenge. The dilemma is that his revenge is justified, but it is not justified if he avenged his dead father. It is the ethical dilemma that is preventing him from making his choice and so he asks the question of "to be or not to be".

The ethical choice of Hamlet is about what choice he makes is to be a moral human being. Not only it is necessary for Hamlet to experience the choice of being a human, but for the people to experience this choice. Ethical choice is our life. In fact, we are making ethical choices all the time, so we all live in ethical choices. The value of literature is to write down all these ethical choices as examples of our ethical choices in real life. By dissecting, elaborating, and evaluating these ethical choices, ethical literary criticism provides us with moral enlightenment. Ethical choice is both the most basic phenomenon and the deepest structure in our life and society. So, it is also the basic structure of literary ethical criticism.

In the theoretical system of ethical literary criticism that I have in mind, ethical choice or ethical selection with ethical choice is its core theory. It can also be said that ethical choice is the basic principle and theoretical framework. The arguments, viewpoints, terms and concepts of ethical literary criticism are all generated from ethical choice or ethical selection with ethical choice.

In English, the Chinese term "lún lǐ xuǎn zé" translates to "ethical selection" and "ethical choice" at the same time. Since there is no appropriate term that corresponds to it in Chinese, we have to use the term "lún lǐ xuǎn zé" to refer to two things, namely: ethical selection and ethical choice. The difference between them is that ethical selection refers to the entire process of ethical choices, and ethical choice refers to the actions of choice. Ethical selection is a singular term, while ethical choice is plural. The former refers to a new process of civilization of human beings after natural selection,

while the latter refers to a series of choice actions to finish the ethical selection of humans and humanity. From this perspective, as far as the individual is concerned, life from birth to death is a process of ethical selection made up of ethical choices. The process of ethical selection is closely integrated with ethical choices and cannot be separated therefrom. Both humankind and human beings need to complete the process of ethical selection through countless ethical choices. All activities of human beings, whether productive, social, emotional, or spiritual, are all actions of ethical choice. Above all, we live in ethical choices, upon which the life and existence of human beings are based. The same is true for ethical choices in literature.

In general, ethical literary criticism holds that literature is the product of ethical choices of human activities and the art form of ethical expressions at a specific historical stage. Human beings invented written symbols and recorded their lives, events, and understandings through writings. Records in written words are texts that make up literature. Therefore, the emergence of literature is the result of ethical choices, and its value lies in the description of humans' ethical choices. Literary works focus on human beings, narrating their lives, and expressing their feelings through ethical choices. They teach how to be a moral man by narrating examples of choices in life and society. Hence, ethical choices constituting ethical selection becomes the theory of ethical literary criticism. In this way, the function of literature has been recognized.

Ethical choice is not only the core composition of literary works but also the basic structure, namely, framework of literary theory. In other words, its structure or framework is ethical choice. In terms of ethical literary criticism, it can be used to read, understand and interpret literature. That is to say, we read, understand and analyze literary works by virtue of ethical choice.

In contrast to moral criticism, ethical literary criticism, on the other hand, emphasizes the interpretation of literature from a historical point of view, rather than simply judging the moral value of literature as good or bad. It focuses on analyzing the objective ethical causes, processes, results, and impacts of all kinds of ethical choices in literature to avoid subjective

aesthetic evaluation and ethical prejudice in literary interpretation due to personal aesthetic taste and tendency. Then, ethical literary criticism can be summarized as follows: (1) ethical literary criticism is a theory and method of literature; (2) the theory of the three stages of human civilization is its theoretical basis; (3) ethical choice or ethical selection with ethical choice is its theoretical framework; (4) literary texts and works are critical objects; (5) the main path of criticism is the analysis of ethical choices and identity; and (6) its purpose is was to obtain instructions from different examples of ethical choices in the literature for being a moral human.

As a literary theory, we can further summarize the theoretical system of ethical literary criticism based on the following ethical choices: (1) an ape obtains human form through natural selection by way of evolution but can obtain human essence by ethical selection through ethical choices; (2) ethical selection is made up of ethical choices and has become the core theory of ethical literary criticism; (3) the aim of ethical choices is to be moral humans by way of teaching and learning; (4) literature or a literary text is a tool for teaching and learning, but it is still necessary to have an explanatory text for the use of such tools; and (5) the task of ethical literary criticism is to write instructions for readers to use literary tools, to read and understand literary texts and guide them to make choices for being moral humans.

Conclusion

As a literary theory, we can summarize the theoretical system of ethical literary criticism on the basis of ethical choice: After ape obtained the human form by way of evolution in natural selection, human being appeared and entered ethical selection. In the stage of ethical selection, man is trying to acquire human essence by way of ethical choice to be a human being instead of an animal. In essence, ethical choice is the choice of being a moral man and its method is teaching and learning. What to teach and what to learn? It is literature that is the tool for teaching and learning and the tool is the literary text. The question now is how to use this literary tool to read, understand and explain the texts for teaching.

As discussed earlier, ethical literary criticism constructed its theory of ethical election with ethical choice in the new century on the basis of the three stages of human civilization, namely, natural selection, ethical selection and scientific selection. Ethical selection presupposes natural selection and takes scientific selection as its future. Since we evolved from animals to become human beings, we have been trudging along the long road of ethical choice, and trying to find ways to become human beings. After the written symbols were invented by human beings, they were used to record the experiences of human beings and then the texts consisting of written symbols became literature used as a tool by human beings; that is, as a tool for teaching and learning of human beings. For human beings, the importance of literature is not only as a tool to record human life, but also to learn from recorded human, develop habits, and form ethics through literary forms. This was the way the earliest ethics appeared, and the society was put in order. However, due to the limitation of cognition, human beings cannot use this tool skillfully because they do not know how to learn from literature how to make ethical choices. This is where ethical literary criticism comes in. Through the analysis of the examples of ethical choice in literature, we get instructions on how to read, understand literature, and learn from it to make better ethical choices in real life. It is precisely for this purpose that ethical literary criticism has constructed its theory of ethical choice and developed the terminology for interpreting and criticizing literature.

In the theoretical system of ethical literary criticism, ethical choice is its basic framework. Based on the framework of ethical choice, ethical literary criticism not only has formed its theoretical system with a series of concepts such as the viewpoint of ethical expression, the viewpoint of literary texts, the viewpoint of literary teaching, the viewpoint of language generation and so on, but also formed its critical discourse with terms such as Sphinx factor, human factor, animal factor, ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical dilemma, ethical environment, ethical context, natural will, free will rational will and so on. In this way, ethical literary criticism can be easily used in the study of literature.

In the context of discussion on the end of theory and the death of theory and from new perspectives, ethical literary criticism explores the origin, the form, the function, the value and other issues of literature from its generation. By integrating literature with ethics, philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, computer science, neurocognitive science and others, it tries to abandon obsolete ideas, answer the questions on the death of literary theory, and discuss the change and evolution of literature. Through the influence of science, literary forms, content and style of literature will inevitably undergo great changes in the new century. Some old literary forms will disappear, and some new literary forms will be born. This trend will lead to the renewal of literary concepts and innovation of literary theory. It can be said that the ethical literary criticism was born at this time. As an interdisciplinary theory, it combines literature with linguistics, philosophy, psychology, economics, politics, law, computer science, and cognitive neuropsychology. Indeed, the interdisciplinary turn of ethical literary criticism has arrived.

Notes

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